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AUTHOR Apseloff, Marilyn
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ABSTRACT

There has been a remarkable amount of production and publication of children's poetry since the 1960s. One of the early, popular anthologies of children's poetry was "Miracles" (Simon & Shuster, 1966), with poems from English-speaking countries revealing how imaginative children could be and their use of metaphors. "The Me Nobody Knows: Children's Voices from the Ghetto" (Avon, 1969) is a collection that appeared at the end of the decade revealing that inner-city children wanted to and could express themselves in writing. "Mad Sad & Glad" (Scholastic, 1970) contains poems from the Scholastic Creative Writing Awards, demonstrating the junior and senior high school writers' interest in language and imagery. Kenneth Koch's "Wishes, Lies, and Dreams" (Random House, 1970; Vintage, 1971) contains an essay on teaching children to write poetry, and presents the results of classroom collaborations that gradually led children to create their own works. In 1971, several collections appeared, among them "Peace Is You and Me" (Avon, 1971), which used more rhyme than is found in other collections. "Male & Female Under 18" (Avon, 1973) contains prose and poetry about young people's sex roles in today's society. This collection is more important for what it says than for how well the thoughts are expressed. These and other collections reveal that children have "potential" as poets; many of them are highly observant and imaginative. Children should be encouraged to write and learn more about the craft. (Samples of poetry from some of the collections discussed are included.) (HTH)

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CHILDREN'S POETRY: WRITING AS AN AWAKENING

by

Marilyn Apseloff

English Department

Kent State University

Kent, Ohio 44242

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Although children have expressed themselves in verse much earlier, there has been a remarkable output and publication of children's poetry since the 1960's. This poetry is sometimes immature, lacking in technique, and imitative, yet some poems are startlingly original, with unusual figures of speech rather than clichés. For all of the budding poets, good and bad, writing poetry offers them a means of expression which heightens their awareness of their language and what can be done with it. Writing poetry also increases their appreciation of the works of others, and if they do not become lifelong writers themselves, they may become lifelong lovers of poetry.

One of the early, popular anthologies of children's poetry was Miracles, collected by Richard Lewis (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1966). Its poems are from English-speaking countries, and they reveal how imaginative children can be and their ability to use metaphor. One haiku reads:

> Hours are leaves of life
> and I am their gardener . . .
> Each hour falls down slow. (p. 21)

Another poem written by an eleven-year-old is as follows:

> The candle screamed with fury.
> Hot tears trickled down her face.
> With figure slumped,
> She slowly dwindled into shadows
> Darkness! (p. 209)

Some children handle assonance and consonance well, as in "Jellyfish":

Domelike top, speckled comets converging;
Gold-green flesh, wave edges urging.
Jellylike globules, soft lattice arms,
Spiked fury, leather-lash meting out harm.

Golden-smooth rods, waving whiplike with water,
Beauty and danger, the jellyfish slaughter. (p. 92)

Here the child experiments with alliteration and rhyme, but most of the poetry is in free verse, often in just a single stanza. Frequently a line or two rather than an entire poem stand out: "Two twigs acting as a loom / Hold a wonderful weaving." (p. 97) The collection discloses children's startling capabilities with language and, occasionally, with form.

Another anthology of children's verse which appeared two years later was Green Is Like a Meadow of Grass, selected by Nancy Larrick and illustrated by Kelly Oeschli (Champaign, Illinois: Garrard, 1968). Some of the poems grew out of the children's hearing and reading Mary O'Neill's Hailstones and Halibut Bones and Carmen Bernos de Gasztold's Prayers from the Ark, such as "Gray is a feeling / like forgetting your lunch" (p. 29) or "Dear God / I weave all day / I get so tired / Why do you let people hit me?" (p. 58) Most of the poems are very short, yet the imagery is often unusual, as in "The Pine Trees: They look like giant hair brushes / With pine cones as snarls to be brushed out." (p. 15) Other images are more traditional but effective, especially considering the child's age. The following two lines, for example, were written by a nine-year-old: "Daffodils are pieces of the sun / That have fallen to the ground." (p. 13)

A collection that appeared at the end of the decade revealed that inner-city children wanted to and could express themselves in writing. The Me Nobody

Knows: Children's Voices from the Ghetto, edited by Stephen M. Joseph (New York: Avon, 1969)[1], contains both prose and poetry. Many of the poems rely on repetition for effect, such as "Boys!":

> Boys, boys, boys, boys, boys,
> Boys, boys, boys, boys, boys,
> BOYS! (p. 26)

A different tone is projected in "Jail-Life Walk" with its repetition:

> Walk in the Day
> Walk in the Night
> Walk a chalk line
> Walk it right
>
> . . . .
>
> . . . .
>
> Walk on Water
> Walk on a Leaf
> Hardest of all is
> Walk on Grief. (p. 33)

Although some of the children rely on clichés (white clouds, blue skies) for description, a child or two can take a common expression ("Religion is a crutch") and rephrase it effectively:

> Take hold the crutch you lame believers
> Limp through life upon the sacred word. (p. 138)

After two middle stanzas, the first two lines are repeated to conclude the poem. Other poems in The Me Nobody Knows contain misspellings, poor grammar, sometimes incoherent lines, yet even with these deficiencies, perhaps because of them, the feelings of the children and the occasional effective line or poem stands out. Surely these children, now exposed to expressing themselves through the written word, will be better able to relate to other writers, to appreciate the struggle that each writer goes through to put words on paper. That alone would make children's writing worthwhile.

The following year, 1970, another collection of poems written by children in junior and senior high schools appeared. Mad Sad & Glad, selected and edited by Stephen Dunning (New York: Scholastic),[2] contains poems from the Scholastic Creative Writing Awards, primarily in free verse although there is some haiku included, too. These poems reveal the writer's interest in language and imagery, for many of the poems are replete with metaphors and similes: "I am the open-armed sky," (p. 23) "Autumn is an old woman," (p. 42) and the following excerpt:

> There was a chuckle of frost
> Lacing the brown edges of grass-blades
> This morning, and its small bright teeth
> Nipped our nerve endings, and snickered
> Icily. (p. 44)

"The Games People Play" very cleverly moves the reader from stanza to stanza by a split word whose ending becomes a name that begins the next stanza: "looking for a vic- / timmy playing baseball." (p. 71) In other poems a line impacts: "One clean-sponge May." (p. 76) A crow becomes "Nature's black sheep / That nobody wants," (p. 112) and a lake

Is a ball of

Quicksilver

Shimmering in the

Cupped hands of the earth. (p. 113)

Much of the poetry in this volume is descriptive of nature, people, and places of a more middle-class environment, quite different from the ghetto scenes in The Me Nobody Knows.

Another collection appeared in 1970, Wishes, Lies, and Dreams by Kenneth Koch (New York: Random House; rpt. Vintage, 1971).[3] It contains a long essay, "Teaching Children to Write Poetry," and the results of classroom collaborations that gradually led children to create their own works. The collaborations cannot be called poetry, or even verse, but they do break down the barriers against writing that many children have erected, and in that respect the collaborations can be a good starting point for adults to use with recalcitrant writers. Once children have begun to write and are no longer afraid of it, they should be taught that collaborations and poetry are very different.

In 1971 several collections appeared, among them Peace Is You and Me, edited by Florence Weiner (New York: Avon).[4] Most of these children's poems are in free verse, with some haiku. Some of Kenneth Koch's methods were used, such as having the child begin each line with assigned words:

Peace is Groovy,

Peace is wow,

Peace is what is happening now. (partial poem, p. 16)

More rhyme is used than in the other collections, but because these writings are from schools and peace centers, much of the impact of the occasional good line or poem is lost through repetition from poem to poem.

More collections of children's poetry were published during the seventies. Often poetic competence is lacking, the poetry undistinguished, but the writing still has value. As Richard Lewis wrote in "A Dialogue of Poetry,"

> When we can get children to respond to language, to write it the way they want to and write about the things they want to write about in the form and manner they prefer, then they will have the impetus for discovering what other people have written.[5]

The Children: Poems and Prose from Bedford-Stuyvesant, edited by Irving Benig (New York: Grove, 1971), reveals the feelings of children. Some are obviously class assignments like the night poems since each begins with the same two lines: "The long night passed / The moon slid slowly across the heavens." (pp. 21-29) Some poems are highly descriptive ("I feel like rain falling from the sky"--p. 19), but most are important for the feelings expressed. One ten-year-old plays with words in "Acrostic":

> What makes words? Letters?
> Of course, but what makes letters?
> Rhythm?
> Does that make words? Well, think about it.
> Slowly, slowly, slowly think about it. (p. 87)

A departure from inner-city poetry is Male & Female Under 18, edited and with comments by Nancy Larrick and Eve Merriam (New York: Avon, 1973). This volume contains prose and poetry, "Frank Comments from Young People About Their Sex Roles Today" (subtitle). There is a mixture of free and rhymed verse

and unusual imagery, the latter shown in "Dainty and Quiet":

> Girls used to be . . . poodles
> so dainty, quiet,
> and always loved to be papmered.
> But now . . . they're German shepherds,
> standing out, demanding their rights,
> and wanting to be treated like guys. (p. 56)

Another teenager describes "Life Like an Amusement Park," with its "ferris wheel of life"; (p. 146) and a fourteen-year-old writes that

> I feel like a
> Caged-in tiger,
> Barred by the irons of society. (p. 154)

Metaphors and similes abound in this collection as boys and girls express themselves, not always with optimism:

> I see the pollution pouring over the earth
> like the way a witch pours a poison potion over a crystal ball.
> (p. 144)

Not surprisingly, many of the poems concern the communication gap between parents and children; others are about pollution and peer pressure. Primarily, the collection is more important for <u>what</u> is said rather than for how well the thoughts are expressed.

Another anthology of children's poetry is <u>Grab Me a Bus</u>, edited by M. Joe Eaton and Malcolm Glass (New York: Scholastic, 1974). It contains award-winning poems from junior and senior high school students in the United

States, poems that are primarily in free verse and that are filled with metaphors and similes: "Leaves on the sidewalk curl like tiny hands." (p. 29) "Poetry Under Pressure" is a fresh example of the traditional subject of writing a poem:

> Six poems due tomorrow--
> Three written.
> A poem
> written on demand
> is difficult to do
> and can hardly
> be aesthetically satisfying.
> After all--
> when three ounces of pop
> fill a six-ounce glass
> you know it's mostly ice. (p. 14)

Another student writes, "old and imperfect snow lies like nibbled swiss cheese." (p. 10) Some try their hands at haiku:

> The ocean sways
> like the feet of
> an upturned caterpillar. (p. 42)

These students are obviously enjoying playing with language, seeing what it can do.

As the seventies progressed, more collections were published. Flirting With the Trees, edited by Jennifer Moyer (Chicago: Illinois Arts Council, 1977), contains poems written by children in reaction to poets in residence

at their elementary and secondary schools. The writing of the youngest group is complete with their misspellings, poor grammar, and incorrect punctuation, and is at times incoherent:

> Today is a feeling day we haf
> to a lot of stoff like apples
> and oranges and one more a
> pineapple. (n. p.)

Most of the poems are unstructured and are about nature; some show an interest in rhyme. Several were obviously the result of suggestions made to the children, for three of them begin, "My eyes are. . . ." There are also class collaborations. Some metaphors are trite, such as the sun's being likened to a "huge great ball of fire," (n. p.) but others are more skillful: "Brooms are the arms of snowmen / . . . . and skinny women with big hips." (n. p.) One, "Transformation," has interesting sound effect:

> Ravens,
> reviling,
> refusing,
> rebelling, their
> misguiding,
> malicious
> masters. (partial poem, n. p.)

The bulk of the collection reveals that children need to know more about the craft of poetry.

Another anthology from 1977 was <u>They Came to School Dressed Like Flowers</u>, edited by Robert Fox (Columbus: Ohio Foundation on the Arts). As in the pre-

vious volume, the poems here grew out of the children's work with resident poets in their schools. Each resident poet is identified briefly, and one of his poems is given, followed by the work of the students. Almost all are in free verse, and some are collaborations. Some are merely one-line comparisons: "My cat's fur is as shiny as a mirror reflecting the sun's rays." (p. 21) Some students experimented with haiku, one with a sonnet, and others tried the cinquain. One of the latter was effective:

> Poem--
> clear, bright,
> drifting, freeing, beautifying.
> Let it be noticed.
> Snowflake. (p. 78)

The editor noted that "Process rather than technique highlights the movement--a process marked by self discovery and communal sharing." (p. 5) Some poems are imaginative and catch the eye and mind, such as "Wooden Bugs":

> Somewhere, over the land, in a deep dark hole,
> wooden bugs in their cedar house, somewhere,
> in the walnut valley, licking their maple legs clean,
> in the valley of trees, wooden bugs. (p. 16)

Several students wrote about their reactions to certain paintings they had seen by Sisley, Vlaminck, and Rembrandt. Other poems were the result of a day-long field trip to the Dayton Museum of Natural History. Some resident poets gave very specific instructions to the children, telling them to begin with "I opened my door this morning and saw . . ." or "He's not so bad." Not surprisingly, when the resident poet used rhyme, more children did, too. Some

verses were reminiscent of the Kenneth Koch collaborations, with the same lack of quality:

> Porky Pig in California
> to get a suntan
> Bugs Bunny in the Statue of Liberty
> to get some peace and quiet. (p. 102)

From the writings it is clear that children are imaginative and can follow directions, but the volume also reveals that children need to learn a great deal more about poetry.

In 1978 an anthology appeared containing award-winning entries from the W. H. Smith Children's Literary Competition. Children As Writers, 5, introduced by Sir Jack Longland (London: Heineman), is especially interesting because it comes from England instead of the United States. The volume is divided according to three age groups: those eight and under; those nine to twelve; and children thirteen to sixteen. There is both prose and poetry. In some of the latter clichés are combined with fresh imagery, as in "Teeth":

> My teeth are hard like
> Stones and white like clouds.
> When they fall out it seems
> as if a window is open for
> a bit of fresh air. (p. 5)

There are also characteristic British similes and metaphors:

> The surveyor with his telescope
> A victorious Nelson.

Spots a ship.
He raises his hand
To tell the guns to get ready to fire.
He sinks the ship.
He puts up his thumb
To say we've won. (p. 16)

"The Garden Hose," written by an eleven-year-old, is good, especially the last line of the first stanza: "Bubbles chase like bobsleighs through the twisting root." (p. 29) Young British poets, however, like their American counterparts, often rely on clichés such as the following lines from "All in Black":

He lies there,
As white as a sheet,
As cold as a stone. (p. 13)

Although "there is an astonishing richness and freshness, both of imagination and of perception of the world in which today's child lives," (p. v) there are the same technical problems in this collection that are found in the others, but to a lesser degree. The British children seem to have a better grasp of language and what it can do; they seem to be more sophisticated in that sense than children in the United States. In "Clock's Song," for example, there is wordplay with onomatopoeia in the five stanzas, shown here in the first:

An archaic, horrifically antiq-
uated ping, predicts the final flick
of the click spring--now left static;

never to sing another despic-
able epic; a dead metronomic King. (p. 35)

The final collection for this study, which has been able to include only a selection of the numerous anthologies of children's poems available, is another volume edited by Robert Fox: Good Old Poems / I Love Them (Columbus: Ohio Arts Foundation, 1979). He makes clear his intent in his introduction:

> We feel strongly that the act of writing the kinds of exercises that appear in this collection lets students discover that they have the creative imagination necessary to become creative readers. (p. xiv)

Note that he uses the term "exercises" instead of "poems." There is more experimentation with poetic forms here, such as sonnets, pantoums, and a sestina, in addition to the usual free verse and haiku, but there are also class collaborations. Cliches are still prevalent: "strong as an ox / and big as a mountain / . . . . . / black as night." (p. 119) There are appropriate similes in occasional lines--"My thoughts are jammed together / like roses in a vase" (p. 120)--or in a complete poem:

> Fifth Grade Exercise
> A turtle, like a tank turret
> With a cannon head that pivots
> From side to side, works its treads
> Heavily on the hot black tar
> As it reaches for the yellow lines. (p. 132)

This collection is similar to the previous one edited by Robert Fox (They Came to School Dressed Like Flowers), except that it is much larger

and it contains some poems by teachers as well as by the students and the resident poets. There is more rhyming here, too, and a few concrete poems. Some poems contain city imagery: "My view of the world is litter and cement-gray odors." (p. 189) Others are based upon reactions to a painting or to sounds.

The selections of children's poetry collections chosen for this study reveal that children have potential as poets, for many of them are highly observant and imaginative. Claudia Lewis, in her essay "The Poetic Language of Childhood," states that "adult poets know that life in a poem springs from the use of lively senses."[6] Children already have "lively senses" and are often quick to respond to suggestions that encourage their own writing. Furthermore, children who write are usually more interested in reading what others have done and are more observant of how others use and manipulate language. They become more aware of the possibilities of language, of its sounds and connotations as well as meanings, of its rhythms. For these reasons children must be encouraged to write and to learn more about their craft, for that writing and learning will provide them with lasting pleasure and value.

Notes

[1] Another collection from that year is Here I Am!, edited by Virginia Olsen Baron and illustrated by Emily McCully (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969). Subtitled "An Anthology of Poems Written by Young People in Some of America's Minority Groups," it contains poems by Navajo and Eskimo children as well as the work of inner-city youngsters. See also Chicory: Young Voices from the Black Ghetto, edited by Sam Cornish and Lucian W. Dixon (New York: Association Press, 1969).

[2] Other publications in 1970 were City Talk, a collection of cinquains edited by Lee Bennett Hopkins, illustrated by Roy Arenella (New York: Knopf); There are Two Lives, an anthology of Japanese children's poems, translated by Haruna Kimura and edited by Richard Lewis (New York: Simon and Schuster); and The Voice of the Children, poems from a creative writing workshop compiled by June Jordan and Terri Bush (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston).

[3] Koch later wrote Rose, Where Did You Get That Red? (New York: Random House, 1973; rpt. Vintage, 1974) in which he explains how to teach great poetry to children. Included are the children's creative responses and an anthology of great poems to use.

[4] Some other collections from that year are Young Voices, collected by Charles Schaefer and Kathleen Mellor (New York: Macmillan), containing poems about contemporary problems; and it is the poem singing into your eyes, edited by Arnold Adoff (New York: Harper).

[5] Somebody Turned on a Tap in These Kids: Poetry and Young People Today, edited by Nancy Larrick (New York: Dell, 1971), pp. 145-46.

[6] Ibid., p. 28.

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